

Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Committee on Government Reform
**Hearing on “Serving the Underserved in the 21st Century: The Need for a Stronger,
More Responsive Public Health Service Commissioned Corps.”**
October 30, 2003

Good morning. I would like to welcome everyone to today’s oversight hearing on the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) proposed transformation of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps. In light of new and emerging threats to our nation’s public health, this hearing will focus on proposed improvements to make the Commissioned Corps a more readily deployable force to respond quickly and effectively to emergency health needs around the country.

The Commissioned Corps, one of the seven uniformed services of the United States, is comprised of highly-trained and mobile health professionals who carry out programs to promote good health, understand and prevent disease and injury, assure safe and effective drugs and medical devices, deliver health services to Federal beneficiaries, and supply health expertise in time of war or other national or international emergencies. Corps officers have been providing health care to American citizens for over 200 years and are constantly adapting to changing demands and new challenges in the public health field. However, currently, the Commissioned Corps is underutilized and underdeveloped. As a result of this, HHS intends to strengthen the public health infrastructure by transforming the Corps to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

The rationale behind the proposed transformation is deep-rooted in new emerging threats facing our country. As the U.S. continues to face uncertain threats, including possible terrorist attacks and infectious diseases, it is critical that the Secretary has well trained medical professionals who can respond immediately and appropriately to an emergency need. These proposed changes are essential to improving our nation’s public health and ensuring that the Commissioned Corps will be an effective and efficient force of healthcare professionals.

There are three main principles guiding the transformation proposal. The first is to expand and enhance the Commissioned Corps. The second initiative aims to improve and expand training and deployability of Commissioned officers to areas where primary care services are lacking. The third initiative will improve the Commissioned Corps’ management and development structure.

Under the proposal, the Commissioned Corps’ size, structure, and response capabilities will evolve into a more accessible team of healthcare and public health professionals. The Corps will remain committed to traditional public health needs, including providing healthcare to underserved areas around the country, supporting the expansion of community health centers, and strengthening the health care safety net for

all Americans. These functions will be balanced with emergency response efforts to create a better-equipped and more effective Commissioned Corps.

In closing, I think it is important to note, these ideas for reorganization are not novel concepts; deployability and fitness standards for corps officers date back well over a hundred years. Ultimately, the Commissioned Corps needs to be strengthened and its mission broadened to include traditional and evolving needs in the public health field. With these changes, the Commissioned Corps will be better equipped to protect, promote, and advance our nation's public health.

I understand some of our witness this morning will express concerns about specific elements of the transformation plan. I look forward to a constructive dialogue on those concerns. I know we all share the same goal at the end of the day—a Commissioned Corps dedicated to, and prepared for, emerging 21st century challenges and needs.

We have a great selection of witnesses to provide testimony this morning. Surgeon General Carmona is here to provide the Committee with an overview of the Commissioned Corps and detail the need for a reorganization of the Corps.

Joining us on our second panel will be former Surgeon General, Dr. C. Everett Koop, who will offer his opinions on the transformation policy. Former Assistant Secretary for Health and Surgeon General, Dr. Julius Richmond, will also provide the Committee with his expertise in the area of public health. Finally, Captain Gerard Farrell, Executive Director of the Commissioned Officers Association, will offer the perspective of officers in the Commissioned Corps.